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RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.

THE ALLEGED FAILURE OF PROTESTANTISM:

A SERMON

PREACHED IN

THE UNITARIAN CHURCH,

AT WASHINGTON, ON WASHINGTON'S BIRTH-DAY,

February 22, 1852.

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PUBLISHED BY REQUEST OF THE SOCIETY.



WASHINGTON:

PRINTED BY KIRKWOOD & MCGILL.

1852.

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SERMON.

JOHN, VIII. 32.

“AND YE SHALL KNOW THE TRUTH, AND THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE.”

MARTIN LUTHER, the modern representative of *religious* liberty, was buried on the 22d of February, 1546; George Washington, the modern representative of *political* liberty, was born on the 22d of February, 1732; and, although nearly two hundred years divided the period of their respective lives, we might almost feel as if the shroud of Luther had been the swaddling-clothes of Washington. While Luther communicated to the world the greatest impulse to mingled freedom and zeal in religion which it has received since Paul's day, Washington gave to universal civilization the noblest and most powerful impulse it ever felt from regulated political liberty. Luther was a political religionist; Washington a religious politician; and both of them devoted to freedom. Neither of them speculated about religion, or politics, without immediate reference to practicable and practical results. They were both rather men of action than men of thought. Other men, both in religion and politics, have distinguished themselves more by bold inquiry and unfettered pursuit of theoretical truth. Erasmus and Melancthon were better scholars, and perhaps more consistent thinkers, than Luther, in the days of the Reformation; and Hamilton and Adams were

NOTE.—It is proper to state that this Sermon was written, and first preached in New York, just a year previous to the date of its publication, and was called forth by Bishop Hughes's sermon on the “Decline of Protestantism.”

men of more scholarship and brilliancy of thought than Washington. Roger Williams and Thomas Jefferson carried out the pure ideas of religious and political liberty with more power and consistency than Luther and Washington. But these last names are those of practical men—men who belonged not more to the kingdom of ideas than to the world of people and things, and who felt themselves as responsible for results as for opinions. They were natural leaders of men; born reformers—who were impelled by an equal desire to move forward themselves, and to carry the world with them. This made them not only great men, but wise men—not merely bold, but cautious—not only great to posterity, but great to their own times; because eminently successful. The readiness with which the whole world has admitted the claim of these apostles of Liberty, illustrates the homage which is paid to success—to practical talents, to popular command—when in any good degree justified by personal worth and noble aims. The popular enthusiasm about Napoleon, the most illustrious man of action the world ever saw, shows that even selfishness and vice cannot take all the lustre from power and success. But Luther was a religious Napoleon—Washington a philanthropic Napoleon. They had his power over men, his faculty of ruling, with hearts devoted to God and Humanity; and while he must forever stand in the admiration of men, like the pyramid he apostrophized in his Egyptian campaign, a vast and magnificent monument of ill-devoted and useless power and skill, they will live in the honor of the world, more like the river that rolls at its base, mighty and beneficent, fertilizing and unfailing. And yet, brethren, there are those, even higher than they—men whom neither pyramids nor mountains, rivers nor plains, nor anything below the stars of heaven, can symbolize—men in whom action yielded to suffering—men of grand thought and sublime feeling—of whom their age was not worthy; who achieved no success while they lived, and the glory of whose influence is lost in its depth and its diffusiveness—not the followers of Paul, but of Jesus. The kingdom of heaven cometh not with observation. He that did not strive nor cry, and whose voice was not heard in the streets, is, after all, the deepest, widest, and noblest benefactor of men; and

the influences which have entered the world from men of pure thought and exalted feeling, while they neither dazzle nor take palpable form, are nobler and deeper than those the most successful men of action can boast. Milton was greater than Luther, and the day may come when Channing will be deemed greater than Washington. Thus much let me say in reverence to the truth, even in honoring to the utmost the memory of the men whom the 22d of February brings to our minds; for when we praise the good, who are at the same time successful, we must take care that the homage we render to worth is not appropriated by power.

Luther and Washington, together, represent the great idea of modern times—practical freedom, civil and religious. Their influence was never more potent, their inspiration never more precious, than now.

The extent of the influence which this country has had upon the prospects of political liberty in the Eastern Hemisphere cannot be exaggerated. It is not too much to say, that the success of our institutions is the ruin of theirs. The monarchs and aristocracies of Europe could have well afforded to relinquish half their prerogatives and privileges to have bought the failure of our democratic experiment. It would be a delightful task to-day to trace the triumphs of our principles in the condition and prospects of foreign politics; for every crown in Europe would be seen to be nodding to the plume of him who was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his fellow-countrymen." But a topic more appropriate to the day and the place commands our attention, *i. e.* The prospects of religion, under the condition of that ecclesiastical freedom which Luther bequeathed to the church by his death, and Washington certified by his birth to our own beloved land. The subject has a peculiar interest at this time from the direct antagonism of Protestantism and Romanism.

The Reformation, after having achieved all its territorial triumphs within Luther's own day, is about resuming its obstructed career, called into activity by the revival of its old foe. The Catholic Church, the constant representative of an authority in

religion independent of reason or voluntary allegiance, is partaking the reanimating influences of the world, and seeking in that decay of vigilance which has attended the great success of Protestantism, or in that diversion of religious thought which accompanies the social prosperity of the world, to win back to herself the lost heart of Christendom. Seeing how much of her old leaven still lived in the Reformed Church, and that Protestantism had come to a stand; noticing that the religious affections of many souls in Protestant countries were wandering in search of grateful objects of interest; that sects were breaking up, and a great many of their adherents had become either tired of liberty or indifferent to religion,—the Catholic Church has naturally enough concluded that Protestantism is a self-conscious failure, about to give up its struggle for independence, and leave the prodigal child to fall back into the arms of its parent. She has accordingly announced the decline of Protestantism, and commenced her aggressive career in a country long known as the bulwark of the reformed faith. But she finds, to her consternation, that what she mistook for death was only sleep, and that her bold tread has waked the lion whose long indifference to her stealthy foot-fall she had mistaken for weakness and decay. It is manifest that a new struggle has begun between the Catholic Church and the Protestant; or, rather, between the elements of religious authority and religious liberty. Unfortunately, it has not commenced in England in a pure form; for there, unhappily, on account of the political complication of affairs, and the union of Church and State, the Catholics, who represent the element of spiritual despotism in religious opinion, represent the element of spiritual liberty in their suffering struggle for toleration—the English people being in a manner forced to defend real freedom in religion by persecuting a form of faith which has always assailed religious liberty, except when claiming toleration for itself. It is to be devoutly hoped that some way may be devised of checking the subtle influence of Romanism, without violating the proud and generous principles of universal toleration which have ennobled British legislation during the last twenty years.

But whatever may be done in England, the conflict between

authority and liberty in matters of religion—between a conscience in charge of a church and a conscience in charge of its owner—is destined to go forward. The struggle may be a long one, for to dethrone ideas which had fifteen centuries of undivided sway, may take at least five centuries. It was preposterous to suppose that two or three centuries could change the religious ideas of the whole Christian world. The Reformation aimed at nothing less than this; and if it had had exclusive possession of society meanwhile, it might have accomplished more than it has; but it has had a busy world to do its work in. Its pupil has been able to give only an interrupted attention to his religious lessons, being much occupied with other great teachers. The political, social, and commercial revolutions which have been meanwhile going on, have, in a great degree, preoccupied the affections and attention of the world; and while to a certain extent favorable to the principles of the Reformation, have in other ways been unfavorable to them, by lessening the exclusive importance of the church question. Thus the religious reformation could not go on while the convulsive struggle for political liberty was agitating the world; and the universal industry and material prosperity of society have in a manner diminished its interest and importance, as it has dulled to a great extent the activity and efficiency of the Catholic Church. But since the political power of the papacy broke down, its spiritual power, being less suspected, has revived. Moreover, as a period of abstract thought and a class of retired thinkers have returned, and ideas have resumed their importance and sway, the Catholic *ideas* (not its hierarchical powers) have reappeared to contend with the Protestant *ideas* for the mastery. The question of old church and reformed church is not now a question of politics, of popular passions—a conflict of time-hallowed prejudices with new impulses—of priestcraft with congregational independency; but it is a battle of ideas, to be fought in the intellect and in the study—a question of experience and religious philosophy. It is in this form that the revived struggle is to be waged—the great question being simply this: Is man well enough disposed and wise enough to be left free in the choice

and application of his religion? Catholicism says he is *not*; and that God has, on this very account, inspired a Church, and given it ample and infallible authority to furnish man a religion—prescribing what is to be believed and to be done, to secure salvation. On the other hand, Protestantism, in Luther's day, said he *was* wise enough and good enough to be left to himself in the choice and application of his religion, and asserted, against the merits which the church treasured for its disciples, the doctrine of justification by faith alone; against its infallibility, the sufficiency of the Scriptures; and against its authority, the right of private judgment. And this is what Protestantism is now called upon to re-assert, and, what is more, to prove, both scientifically and practically. And to do it, she must modify many of her notions; for her theology contradicts her position, and experience contradicts her boasts.

This is not popular doctrine. We are well aware of the common unquestioning confidence in Protestantism, and the popular ignorance, in a country divided by a wide ocean from the theatre of Rome's great dominion, respecting the relative power and character of Catholicism. It is very much the habit of Protestants to claim all that is inspiring in modern history as the direct and exclusive product of their own principles and labors; while Romanism is not slow to charge upon Protestantism all that is discouraging in the condition and prospects of the countries under her control; their infidelity, their industrial poverty, and their anarchy. But Protestantism is neither as good nor as bad as she passes for with her friends and her enemies. When Protestantism claims all the victories which have attended the combined company of progressive ideas belonging to modern times, she forgets that the New World was discovered by a Catholic, and the tremendous impulse which that achievement has given to the intellect and enterprise of the race. She forgets that the printing press preceded the Reformation, and revived learning, causing in part that and other similar movements of the human mind. She forgets that Catholic France has played under Bonaparte the largest part in the world's history for a hundred years back; and that all the Catholicism in the world could not have materially

retarded the political and commercial progress of civilization under those three potent stimulants—the revival of letters, the power of the printing press, and the discovery of the New World. True, Protestantism, purely as such, has done great things for society; but it is as preposterous for her to claim the merit of all the advantages which Protestant countries now possess over Catholic lands, as for the free States to attribute their superiority to the slave States *entirely* to the absence of slavery. As it is the climate, products, and interests of the Southern States which now make them slaveholding States, united to their want of commercial advantages; so it was the fate of the older States of Christendom, which had in a manner run their career, to sink into lethargy when Protestantism leagued with other causes to animate the fresher and then less distinguished parts of the earth. Italy and Spain had had their turn of splendor, and Catholicism did nothing to prevent them from producing a most brilliant civilization; so that some of the highest names in literature and art are still furnished from their catalogues. It was time for the North to blossom; and Protestantism was as much indebted for her success to other causes than animating northern Europe, as they were in turn to her enlivening influences. There is always more immediate life, too, in the attacking party, and in the new idea; and thus the Protestant world had an advantage over its more venerable opponent, not wholly ascribable to the truth and goodness of its cause.

Protestantism has had, thus far, its failures as well as its successes. It stopped short, most unexpectedly to itself, in its territorial victories, having since gained in Europe hardly an inch upon the ground which Luther's setting sun left Catholic. It aimed, too, at unity of doctrine. It expected to have a church as catholic, as popular, as engrossing as the Roman, without its Pope, its ritual, and its tyranny. And what has been its history? It freed many nations and many minds from the Catholic dominion, which it has not been able to bring *entirely* under its own. Its creed has broken into a thousand pieces—its church into a thousand sects. Literature and science, escaped from Roman bondage, have not heartily sought Protestant protection; and

much of the most profound science, and brilliant history, and fascinating literature of the emancipated world, has been unchristian and infidel. Art has withered in its keeping. The boldest schemes of social reform, the freest mind of the age, the most genuine literature, are perhaps as much opposed to Protestantism as to Catholicism, or equally indifferent to both. The masses of the poor are doubting whether the charities of the old church were not preferable to the tender mercies of the new. Above all, the best thought in every department of life, whether in social, commercial, or literary circles, seems to be running on independently, if not in disdain, of the scientific theology of Protestantism. The trinity, the atonement, the doctrine of total depravity—the whole theology of the Reformers—appears to be nearly as much aside from the path of the actual mind and heart of the world, as is the discarded house of a shell-fish from its track to the sea. What doctrine of Calvinism does the popular literature, the popular science, the social manners and habits of the age, recognise? From what one of the Reformers have the most successful moral teachers of the times—Edgeworth and Scott, and Dickens and Irving—learned their philosophy? It is far more Catholic than Calvinistic in its tone; while the gay, festive life of the world, its hopeful and self-indulgent tone, savors more of Roman than Genevan theology. Thus Protestantism has been in no small degree a failure, if its true mission was its own formal triumph; or if its success was to consist in supplying to the world the motherly and protecting office which the old church rendered. It has not taken the place of the Catholic Church. It has not retained within itself, as that did, all the learning and taste, or all the poverty and sorrow of the world. Modern thought and modern wretchedness both turn from it—one to philosophy, the other to socialism; while the Catholic Church picks up from both ends of society—from the learned and the ignorant—the select few who are moved by religious longings for faith and repose.

The fact is, Protestantism little knew what she was doing when she combined with the other free influences of the times, to set the human mind at large. She knew not the Samson she unbound. A power that would not be controlled was set loose in

the earth; and the great and anxious question since, becoming every day more serious and pressing, is this: Whether man, left perfectly at liberty, (as Protestantism, to be consistent, must say he ought to be,) will choose Christianity for his religion, or will have any religion at all? France, in her social practices, has answered that question essentially in the negative; Germany, in her loose philosophy and irreligious tendencies of speculation, has given it an intellectual denial; and this country, in its foreign population, and among no small portion of its most characteristic and enthusiastic youth, says something not very different. It is in this dilemma that the enlightened advocates of Catholicism come forward, and claim an acknowledgment from Protestantism that she has failed in her enterprise and her prophecies, and invite her to restore the religious conduct of Christendom to the authoritative guidance of the Church; and some of the best and most powerful minds of the age have been overpowered by their argument and returned to her communion.

Under these circumstances, what reason have we for not despairing of Protestantism, or for saying that she has not failed in her mission? Simply this: that Catholicism, and even the Reformed Church itself, misstate the true work of Protestantism when they ascribe a positive power to it, or expect any results from it corresponding with those which the old church had produced. Luther and the Reformers doubtless supposed that they were taking the direction of the human mind into their own hands away from the church; they were, in fact, only taking off manacles and chains from its powers, and giving it up to itself. The work of Protestantism has been thus far essentially negative, destructive—stripping off one after another of the old bandages from humanity, and permitting it to feel the free action of its limbs. True, it has meanwhile taught its creed diligently; but the attention of the world has been far more occupied with the liberty it gave than with the dogmas it preached: the freedom has been a novelty and a reality, according with its political and social instincts; the dogmas, largely brought over from the old church, and very ill suited to the new times. The consequence has been that more and more latitude, indefiniteness and

inefficiency have characterized the doctrine and discipline of the Protestant Church, while the heart of its people has gone into other channels than purely religious ones. We Unitarians, who are Protestants of the Protestants, must, I think, recognise the fact that our work hitherto (so far as the world is concerned) has been essentially a negative one—denying error, contending for entire freedom, disowning dogma and discipline; while we have been much more united in opposition to mental and ecclesiastical tyranny than in love and devotion to positive Christianity. This demolition of the Bastiles of the human mind is now destined to go on until not one stone is left upon another. There is very little doubt that every form of orthodoxy will pass through some phase of skepticism, and every form of church government not purely congregational and democratic, be broken up. It will not be at all strange to see those who are now rationalists among the most earnest defenders of revealed religion, when those who are now Calvinists are among its most lax interpreters. The laws of the human mind predict such a future; and Protestantism will not have thoroughly accomplished its work until it destroys the Christianity of mere authority, of habit, prejudice, birth, education, convention, and custom, and leaves the adult human mind an opportunity intelligently to adopt Christianity, of its own free will and choice.

When that day comes—and its dawn is not distant, we hope—we shall hear as little about Protestantism as we do about Catholicism. The true faith will no longer be a Protestant, but an affirmative faith. Men will begin to put on beautiful garments of real belief, instead of throwing off ugly chains of prescription. The world will have set earnestly about the inquiry, not what is to be doubted, but what may be credited. Instead of fearing religious bondage, we shall dread spiritual nakedness; and religion, in place of being the least genial interest of humanity, will be the most lovely and popular friend of the race.

If it be asked what grounds of confidence we have that any such result will follow the destructive work of Protestantism, we answer that the reanimation of the Catholic Church is itself a delightful token of the strength of the religious instincts and affec-

tions in man ; and that the return of many to the Mother Church is only a proof and earnest of the gladness with which the whole work would embrace a positive religion, if its intellect and social interests allowed it to do so. It is the *positive* element in the Romish religion that constitutes its fascination. Let there be a positive element developed out of the negations of Protestantism, and the world will open its whole soul to receive it. Man is a religious being, and the more entirely and completely his nature is developed, the more emphatically will his profoundest instincts appear. This is what Protestantism pretends to believe, when she decides against Romanism, *i. e.* that man left to himself will choose Christianity for his faith. Romanism says he will not do so ; that he will become infidel, and go to ruin. Protestantism denies this, and affirms instead, that he will finally freely choose what Catholicism attempts to force upon him, and crushes his intellectual nature when she succeeds. The thorough emancipation of the human mind—the free exercise of the intellect, the development of all the various individualities, tastes, passions, and propensities of man in his increasing liberty—will soon allow him an opportunity of testing every form of national and of private life, of intellectual state and moral condition. The various nations left to their own choice will place before us the result of all possible experiments in government and society. The best intellects of the world will freely measure themselves against each other, in discussing the truth and falsehood of opinions—political, social, and religious. Nothing can save, nothing ought to save, Christianity, from the most scientific and fearless inquisition ; nothing will be able to protect error from exposure, or withhold truth from publication. And we cannot doubt the result. If we may not trust it, Protestantism is a curse, for it has taught us the right of private judgment ; if we may, then there is every reason to predict the return of the world to a *positive* faith. If Christianity is true, and will bear the test of science, of course it is destined to a very different place in human affections from what is now allotted it. If the religious life—if the example, hopes, prospects, and precepts of Christ are really adapted to this very world we live in, and to the very heart and soul we carry within us, of course they

are not forever to be droned from pulpits into dull ears, and associated with all that is gloomy, unreal, unattractive, and passionless in human life. You must know very well, brethren, that the kind of interest which most of you have in the Christian religion at present, is a very different one from that you have in your business and homes, and has a very small connexion with them. You cannot suppose that a ministerial and professional interest like mine, and a customary and traditional interest like yours, represent, either separately, or together, the true interest of a religion which assumes to be the choicest gift and the dearest concern of the Almighty God. There is something preposterous in the vast importance which God is supposed or asserted to attach to religion, when contrasted with the practical importance which our inmost hearts ascribe to it. It only shows how negative and dead our Protestantism is, and what need we have of the revival of a positive religion in our hearts.

But this positive religion will not appear without the use of means. Freedom, whether political or religious, has no power to produce anything. It merely leaves the faculties free to act. On the other hand, the opposites of freedom—absolute governments and hierarchies, which exist independently of the people, have a positive power. They superintend both the pleasures, the customs, the opinions, and the faith and worship of the people. But freedom destroys the positive functions of church and state. Its theory is, as little meddling as possible with the tastes, pursuits, customs, feelings of the people. They may be trusted to look out for their own interests. But what if they do not look out for them? Then freedom is worse than tyranny. It is manifest that did we not have voluntary institutions of learning and religion in this country, we should be worse off, with all our freedom, than Prussia and England, with their state-endowed schools and churches. But the very principle of Protestantism, that man may be trusted, secures us in the support of these things; and, in point of fact, we do support both religion and education generously in this country; and, in doing so, we are doing only what is necessary, and what our duty and destiny require. Even should there be some blindness in our zeal and

generosity, it is not to be deplored; for we have a general instinct which belongs to liberty, that the reason for having freedom at all is because all of man ought to come out and must come out. Education is a part of liberty, and not only because it renders it safe, but achieves the thing itself. It is liberty. For liberty consists not chiefly in removing the external restraints of church and state, but the internal barriers of ignorance and prejudice—the tyranny of the senses—of custom, habit, and outward circumstances—of dullness, moral rust, and mental stupor. In maintaining schools and churches, we make a positive contribution to liberty, as, in beating down monarchies and ecclesiastical pretensions and institutions, we make only a negative one. The same spirit which destroys the arm of spiritual and civil despotism, upholds the arm of the teacher. If, brethren, you would hasten the day when a positive and pure religion shall sweep from the earth the doubt, the selfishness, the sorrow, and want which Christianity, as now received, knows not how to deal with, educate the people! We must get wisdom from God, through man's experience. We must get Christianity interpreted by the highest and largest intelligence of the race under the freest conditions of thought and life. Here, in this free land, let education, religious and secular, have our most generous support. Start every sleeping talent of humanity into life! Water every precious seed of human capacity! Let there not be a mind in the country that does not lend its light to the cause of truth! Educate!—educate!—by all teachers, religious and lay! Stimulate and develop the vast mass of latent mind in the country. It lies as the virgin gold lay for ages on the Californian river banks. Bring it forth, and add it to the wealth of the world. Then will freedom have set man free, and freemen will choose for Lord and Master, Him who alone is worthy to lead the free to new heights of liberty—to new realms of glory and peace.





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